

Bob Dylan And The Band
The Basement Tapes Complete
Columbia Legacy

by Peter Stone Brown

It's late in 1968. Winter. I'm standing outside freezing on the steps of someone's apartment in Southwest Philadelphia that I had to take the underground trolley to get to. I just gave guy in the apartment, a friend of a friend, 25 bucks (a lot of money back then) to have him shut the door, leaving me on the steps hoping he comes back with a reel of recording tape I'd been trying to find for about six months. The experience was exactly like buying pot except most dealers let you inside for a taste. It turned out that purchase was the beginning of a quest that continue for 46 years. On that tape were the 13 songs that thanks to an article in a then new magazine called *Rolling Stone* would be forever known as *The Basement Tapes*. Listening to the tape back in New York, it was obvious that it was several generations of recordings away from the original which only made the music seem spookier.

Back up a year to November 1967. Nothing had been heard from Bob Dylan since his motorcycle accident on July 29, 1966. A reporter from the *New York Daily News* had tracked him down in May '67, but that was it. Then in autumn of that year, the *New York Times* ran a couple of one-inch stories on the state or non-state as it were of Dylan's contract with Columbia Records. Then one November night, I was listening to Jerry White who had a nightly folk music show in the New York metropolitan area when he announced he had single of a new Bob Dylan song, "Too Much of Nothing" recorded by Peter, Paul & Mary. The song was soon eclipsed by the news that Dylan had recorded a new album in Nashville. That album *John Wesley Harding*, appeared in record stores on January 2, 1968, a Tuesday and the traditional record release day. A few weeks later, I was listening to "Radio Unnameable" an all night free-form radio show hosted by Bob Fass, who was known to be a friend of Dylan's. Fass rarely announced the songs he played, but that night he debuted a new Dylan song, "Down In The Flood," recorded by Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs. During the next six months, new Dylan songs kept appearing by other artists. Manfred Mann had a hit with "The Mighty Quinn," which I didn't even know was a Dylan song at first. "This Wheel's On Fire" was a hit in England by Julie Driscoll, Brian Auger & The Trinity," and The Byrds released a single of "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere." In July an album by the group that backed Dylan on his 1966 tour, *Music From Big Pink* was released, and evidently the group was now called The Band, though only the artists' individual names appeared on the album label,

and the words The Band appeared once in the inside of the record jacket and also on the spine of the jacket. That album had three new Dylan songs, two of them collaborations (his first). It turned out that "This Wheel's On Fire" was co-written with The Band's bassist Rick Danko, and that the opening "Tears of Rage" was co-written with the group's piano player Richard Manuel. The remaining song "I Shall Be Released," sung by Manuel was written solely by Dylan. The previously mentioned article in *Rolling Stone* written by editor Jann Wenner appeared right before the release of *Music From Big Pink*, though in those days it took awhile for that magazine to reach New York.

The tape I bought that day showed Dylan's versions of the songs were often different than the covers though some songs, "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere" and "Mighty Quinn" were somewhat similar. I soon replaced that tape with another reel to reel tape of slightly better quality. However just as I was starting to dig deep into those songs, it was announced that Dylan would appear on a documentary on Johnny Cash on National Educational Television, the predecessor to PBS. The documentary, *Johnny Cash, A Man and His Music* would be released as a film not long after that show. This was the first time most people (unless they attended the Woody Guthrie Memorial Concert at Carnegie Hall a year before) saw the post motorcycle accident Bob Dylan. There was no warning. Suddenly the scene was a recording studio with Dylan and Cash facing each other on a duet of Dylan's song "One Too Many Mornings" played to the Johnny Cash beat. Dylan had short hair, a beard, was chewing gum, and the voice that came out of that person as he sang the second verse was one no one had heard before, deep and smooth. It was the voice that would appear on *Nashville Skyline* which appeared a couple of months later. The reaction of the group of people huddled around a small black and white TV in a Morningside Heights apartment that night was a universal "What the hell was that!?"

Nashville Skyline on the surface had little do to with *The Basement Tapes* or the parables of *John Wesley Harding*, and while every music critic called it country, the chord structure of many of the songs was a lot closer to what was going in Memphis than what was going on in Nashville.

Around the same time bootleg records had started to hit the East Coast, which for me meant no more reel to reel tapes. The most famous of these *Great White Wonder* appeared in an unmarked white jacket and the records themselves had blank white labels though some copies had Great White Wonder or GWW stamped on them. It

had seven of the Basement Tapes songs, a bunch of older songs and outtakes from *Bringing It All Back Home* and *Highway 61 Revisited*.

A few years later, a few more songs from *The Basement Tapes* leaked out. Then in the spring of 1975, after he returned to Columbia records, after *Blood On The Tracks*, Bob Dylan appeared on Mary Traver's radio show on CBS and announced *The Basement Tapes* would be released. It was the first and last time Bob Dylan did anything like that and typically the song he played was not his own and as it turned out it wasn't even a Basement Tape. It was "Yazoo Street Scandal" sung by Levon Helm. The album that appeared caused a lot of controversy among Dylan's fans. A two record set, it included several songs by The Band, but it was obvious that certain songs were touched up slightly with additional guitar and occasional drums. What Robbie Robertson and engineer Rob Fraboni had done was try to create a real album. As a Band fan, I didn't mind the additional songs. Some they had done at their New York debut, others I had heard about and one was recorded by Woodstock musicians Happy & Artie Traum on their debut album for Capitol.

A little over ten years later, an old friend came to visit me from out of state. He had with him two double-record bootleg sets titled *Blind Boy Grunt & The Hawks*. 43 songs. Some were songs that had been released, some were alternate versions. There were also several songs by The Band and several with The Band backing Tiny Tim. By this time bootlegs had changed quite a bit. There was artwork and liner notes. I taped the stuff but went out and acquired the discs as soon as I could. According the price sticker still on one, I paid 50 bucks for each set. But the important thing about this set was it showed Dylan and the Band had recorded more than his own songs. There were old folk and blues songs, an Ian and Sylvia song, a Hank Snow song, and Curtis Mayfield's "People Get Ready."

Fast forward another ten years. It's now the '90s and everything is on compact disc. And suddenly there's a ton of bootlegs either titled *The Genuine Basement Tapes* or *After The Crash* and there's even more originals as well as more takes of those originals and a host of covers, Johnny Cash songs, more Ian and Sylvia songs, a couple of Irish songs, Hank Williams songs, blues songs and songs by contemporaries of Dylan such as Utah Phillips and Eric Von Schmidt. Then in 2001 two different companies issued a lavish four disc set that was essentially the best of the Basement Tapes in a beautifully packed four disc set complete with a booklet, liner notes and other goodies. That still wasn't it. In 2009, a bootleg called *Mixing Up The Medicine* appeared that was all original songs in better quality, pretty much the original Basement Tape that was "liberated from the collection of Neil Young."

I would've thought that was it, but earlier this year a series of events let me to talk to a person is generally considered the supreme Dylan archivist who told me there's more. I wondered what else there could be, but that question was answered on August 26th when I woke up to an email from a friend titled, "Well, Alright!" The email was a link to an announcement that The Basement Tapes complete was being issued on November 4th by Columbia Records as the 11th installment of *The Bootleg Series*. On my first sip of coffee, I woke up real fast. Six discs, the largest Bootleg Series so far, present in chronological order, every single song, without overdubs restored to sound as close to the original as possible.

So why the fuss about a bunch of recordings that mostly happened in the basement of a pink house and also in Dylan's house and at another house, recorded with only a few microphones that were originally intended to be demos of new songs and nothing more?

Initially the interest was the songs which created the link from *Blonde On Blonde* to *John Wesley Harding*. But that link is only sort of. It was several months between the bike crash and the beginning of these recordings. Just as important, I knew listening to that horrible quality reel to reel tape at the end of 1968 that this was some of the best singing Dylan ever did. And in the best songs, there was something dark and mysterious going on, something undefined but there. Something on another level that at times seems unworldly.

The Basement Tapes can be put into three initial categories and within those categories are other categories. There's the seriously intense songs, "Tears of Rage," "This Wheel's On Fire," "I Shall Be Released," "I'm Not There," "Sign On The Cross" and "Open The Door Homer," to name a few and then there's less serious often hysterically funny songs such as "Million Dollar Bash," and then there's songs that are funny initially but also have quite serious lines and moments such as "Please Mrs. Henry" and "Yea Heavy And A Bottle Of Bread." And then there's the covers which covers a wide range of American music with a couple of nods to Irish music and The Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem.

The Bob Dylan who started recording these songs in the spring of 1967 was not the same guy who ended a world tour in May 1966. Whether there was a motorcycle crash and how serious that crash was doesn't matter. Take a look at the footage of the end of the documentary *No Direction Home* and it is painfully desperately clear that if Dylan had kept going like that, he would've died. There as some kind of crash alright and this is the guy who came out the other

side, a survivor. And it was time for Dylan to get to know the guys who backed him up on that tour and for them to know him. While The Hawks were no strangers to the road, they were basically a bar band, a bar band steeped in the blues and R&B suddenly hired to back a guy who'd just reached stardom on a world tour that was usually received with boos and controversy.

The Basement Tapes captures Dylan doing what he originally set out to do, play music. But this is music without the pressure of studios or record companies, guys having fun and trading songs they know, songs they don't know and songs they're making up on the spot. Many of the songs they're clearly learning as they're playing. Songs often start or end abruptly. Some songs are tried again, most are not. There are 138 tracks in all, 30 of them never before released legitimate or on a bootleg.

The set begins with the never before heard "Edge of the Ocean," a beautiful song sketch and like many of the songs here some of the words are dummy words or place holders until the words come along. There's a sadness in Dylan's voice that is on many of the tracks.

It is followed by "My Bucket's Got A Hole In It," a song sung but not written by Hank Williams. It seems Dylan is only accompanied by Robbie Robertson on lead guitar and Rick Danko on bass. At the end of the second verse Dylan (I'm pretty damn sure it's Dylan) lets out a Little Richard type scream that is unlike anything he's done on record and the track ends with him saying "Alright." Next is another previously unheard song, "Roll On Train" that melodically is similar to Chuck Berry's "You Can't Catch Me." Then a real surprise, Dylan in a voice close to the Nashville Skyline voice singing "Mr. Blue." After the first line, "I'm Mr. Blue," you hear one of the guys in The Band laughing. A rocked up version of Johnny Cash's "Balshazzar" during which Garth Hudson makes his first appearance on organ comes next which begins a series of country and western covers including "Big River" and "Folsom Prison Blues." Next is a beautiful version of Pete Seeger's "The Bells of Rhymney," Dylan clearly knowing all the words. Then comes the first known version of Dylan singing "Spanish Is The Loving Tongue," a song he would record three more times that we know of eventually perform live in San Antonio in 1966. All these songs have the feel of someone simply playing his favorite songs. Dylan's voice rich and clear sounding similar to the voice on *John Wesley Harding* is nothing if not passionate. Then comes a bluesy rocker, "Under Control" which is perhaps the closest song on the set to what Dylan and the Hawks were trying out in the studio in late '65 and early '66, and even Dylan's vocal echoes that era.

Dylan's harp makes its first appearance for the traditional American ballad (via Ireland) "Roison the Beau." One of the guys in the band is singing along and Dylan is letting loose kind of the way he did on "Don't Think Twice" at the Philharmonic Hall concert. It's great fun, and features a couple of Robertson solos with Dylan playing harp over them. Then comes kind of a cross between a soul ballad and a country song with the original "I'm Guilty Of Loving You," which sadly ends in the middle. A fairly straight version of "Cool Water" with Garth Hudson alternating between harpsichord and organ. It sounds like Richard Manuel is singing harmony.

Then comes one of the greatest Dylan recordings ever, "The Auld Triangle." Also known as "The Royal Canal," Brendan Behan wrote the song for his play "The Quare Fellow." It is one of the great prison songs and one of the great Irish songs. This is one of the true holy shit moments of The Basement Tapes. The Band fill in behind him clearly improvising creating a sort of folk rock sound. Dylan could have learned the song from Liam Clancy or Ian and Sylvia. Richard Manuel soon joins Dylan on the chorus, and Hudson again alternates between harpsichord and organ. I've been listening to this song for somewhere around 20 years and I still can't play it without playing it again.

Disc one ends with an abbreviated try of the old blues song, "Poor Lazarus," and two takes of another original, "I'm A Fool For You," a song whose structure sort of resembles "Like A Rolling Stone."

A sort of country rock version of the tradition "Johnny Todd" kicks off disc two followed by a most likely stoned take on John Lee Hooker's "Tupelo." Dylan's singing in a low voice with a slight southern accent. Then comes one of the more crazy songs, another folk song "Kickin' My Dog Around," which starts with Dylan explaining what he wants on backup vocals for the song, and the band echoes at the end of the verse with "Dog, Dog, Dog," and "Why Why Why," and then Dylan answers with "Yes, yes, yes." One can imagine the smiles on their faces, as more and more animals enter into it before it's cut off. This is followed by two totally insane takes of "See You Later Allen Ginsberg" with Dylan cracking up halfway through.

Then comes the first song from the original circulating tape of demos, the mysterious "Tiny Montgomery." The Band sing a background vocal of ahs at the end of each verse and the lyrics contain some of Dylan's strangest lines and images such as a "three legged man and a hot lipped hoe."

Another new fragment "Big Dog" is followed by the hysterical "I'm Your Teenage Prayer" which is partially a mock on old rock and roll

songs. Various guys from the band answer Dylan's vocal, and late in the song Dylan even delivers a comical talking part before again cracking up on the last verse.

Two Ian and Sylvia follows, a straightforward slow, sad "Four Strong Winds" and two takes of "The French Girl," a tremendous song written by both of them, which Dylan would revisit years later in rehearsals with the Grateful Dead. This is followed by a song by Dylan's one-time mentor Eric Von Schmidt, his most famous original "Joshua Gone Barbados." Dylan treats all these songs with the utmost respect and love.

After another Hooker song that ends in comedy, Dylan tackles Dallas Frazier's, "Baby Ain't That Fine," before a deep dark version of Utah Phillips' classic "Rock, Salt and Nails." After a half serious take of Hank Snow's hit "A Fool Such As I" with Dylan pulling sort of a Jerry Lee Lewis halfway through he does another Ian and Sylvia tune, "Song For Canada," wrongly titled on bootlegs as "One Single River."

Dylan then plays a 12-string guitar for the first time on "People Get Ready" which is performed reverently. Two country songs, an upbeat version of Hank Snow's "I Don't Hurt Anymore" and "Be Careful of the Stones That You Throw," made famous by Hank Williams in his Luke the Drifter guise. Dylan and Manuel start off by singing the chorus, and then Dylan does the talking part.

Then comes six original songs. Because notes weren't taken originally as to who played what instrument on what track and everyone involved played several instruments no details in that regard are provided. Because Levon Helm who quit during the 1965 tour had not yet returned many of the tracks have no drums. But since there's no audible acoustic guitar, I think Dylan is playing piano on this group of songs with Manuel on drums. Again the songs range from serious to comic with "Baby Let Me Be Your Baby" borrowing its melody from "The Crawdad Song." "I Can't Make It Alone" is high on the intensity meter, while "Don't You Try Me Now" is a blues.

Disc three begins with Dylan playing 12-string on the tradition English (with Scottish ties) ballad, "Young But Daily Growing," which Joan Baez recorded on her second album as "The Trees, They Do Grow High." The Band stays far in the background providing more coloring than anything. This is another example why Bob Dylan is the greatest folksinger of all time. Dylan stays on 12-string for the Scottish whaling ballad, "Bonnie Ship The Diamond," another masterful example of his ballad singing. Dylan then tries and aborts "The Hills of Mexico," actually "The Trail of the Buffalo" which he

would perform in concert several times in 1988 and 1989. There is a snippet of "Down On Me," recorded by Big Brother and the Holding Company as well as Odetta.

For the rest of this disc and the majority of the rest of the set the songs move into the heart of the Basement Tapes, the original songs sent out as demos. First there's two songs, "One For The Road" and "I'm Alright" that will become better known thanks to this release.

Then comes two takes of "Million Dollar Bash," one of the funniest songs Dylan ever wrote. The first take is a bit more relaxed while the second more rocking. On the second take, it's the closest he comes to *Blonde On Blonde* style phrasing, especially when he sings, "I punched myself in the face with my fist."

Then comes the bizarre "Yea Heavy and a Bottle of Bread," which Dylan didn't sing in concert until he played Madison Square Garden in 2002 to my utter astonishment.

This is followed by "I'm Not There," finally released on a Dylan album. It previously appeared on the soundtrack to the movie of the same name. To say this is one of the greatest Dylan recordings ever does not begin to do it justice. Slow, dirgy, mysterious, and sad, Dylan fans have argued for years about the lyrics and whether some of them are actually words. It doesn't matter. It's all in the sound of his voice especially on the second part of every verse when he totally leans into it. This song and this recording are on another level entirely and maybe in another world or another dimension entirely.

The mood is lightened considerably by "Please Mrs. Henry," and this is where the humorous starts merging with the serious in unexpected ways. On one hand, it could be a song about being drunk, but then he slips in these lines:

I'm a thousand years old and I'm a generous bomb (or is it balm)
I'm t-boned and punctured
I've been known to be calm

I've been contemplating for decades on what you get when you add a thousand years old and t-boned and punctured.

Then "Down In The Flood," possibly the greatest blues song Dylan ever wrote and one of the few songs from The Basement Tapes he's consistently performed. Both takes are excellent and Dylan sings like he's channeling the ghost of Robert Johnson.

Then another strange song, "Lo and Behold," again half jokey and half serious. When he sings, "I'm gonna save my money and rip it up," you can't help but laugh and on take one, Dylan does too, cracking up right after he sings it. On the second take he's a bit more sly singing "What's the matter Moby Dick/This is chicken town" with a straight face.

Two takes of "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere" follow. The first take is Dylan improvising and coming up with totally crazy lyrics, the best part being when he sings "You ain't no head of lettuce." The second take is the lyrics recorded by several artists.

Take one of "I Shall Be Released" is brand new and starts with the chorus, but the first verse starts "Everything is not misplaced." This is why the entire Bootleg Series has been important in showing the way Dylan works, trying a line until the right one appears. The last verse is totally different except that someone swears he was framed. The second take is up there with the greatest Dylan recordings.

Then "This Wheel's On Fire," recorded in one perfect take. Slow, rolling and possibly the scariest vocal Dylan's ever done again reaching for something not of this world.

Almost on the same level are the two takes of "Too Much Of Nothing." The first has the ascending chord pattern on the second part of the verse, while take two repeats the first part of the verse. This song, along with "This Wheel's On Fire," "I Shall Be Released" and "Tears of Rage" as well as the entire *John Wesley Harding* album was when I realized Dylan was not necessarily singing of earthly concerns.

Disc four starts with three takes of "Tears of Rage." The second one isn't complete. There is no doubt that The Band's recording of this is one of the great tracks of all time, but Dylan's version while simpler in arrangement is equally strong. What this song is about has been and will be debated for years. It could be about a father watching his child go out in the world and become corrupted but the father could also be The Father.

Two takes of "Quinn The Eskimo" follow.

